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## Actors as Teachers: The Art of Storytelling

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### Recommended Citation

Corbett, C. (2015). Actors as Teachers: The Art of Storytelling. *New York : Bank Street College of Education*. Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/independent-studies/163>

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# **Actors as Teachers: The Art of Storytelling**

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Early Childhood Special and General Education

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of**

**Masters of Science in Education**

**Bank Street College of Education**

**2015**

## **Abstract**

Actors as Teachers: The Art of Storytelling by Catherine Corbett

After working for an interactive theme park for 8 years I was tasked with writing a show for young children in the style of a scavenger hunt. The characters within the show are non-speaking characters, with the exception of a narrator. The study aims to create a show for young children that is inclusive of children along a broad range of development. The characters are built out of the ethnic and cultural backgrounds (and the folkloric stories contained therein) of the actors as according to interview surveys and the rehearsal process. Throughout the rehearsal process, the actors created characters based on themselves to create modern folklore. Included with an original script and personal description and discoveries of each character, there is a list of "Do's and Don'ts" when working with young children in an interactive theatre context.

## Dedication

To my mother, Claudette Lemieux, who taught me to believe in magic.



Photo by: Patricia Murphy August 1977

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### What is the "Faire"?

The Faire is an outdoor theatre festival in New York which celebrates the Renaissance and fantasy. Much in the style of a theme park such as Disney World or Legoland, we are taken out of time into a different space. Effectively, the entire 60 acres of the Faire is a storybook, containing the stories of some two hundred actors and independent performance acts. It is open for nineteen days per year, rain or shine, from 10AM to 7PM. The actors are required to remain in character for this nine hour duration.

In acting, keeping this persona up despite the seemingly insurmountable reality that we are not in fact in a magical land is called "suspended disbelief". In the world of early education, we call this "play". The Faire is essentially a playground for adults and children; a place where the audience is invited and encouraged to play along as we did as children. The Faire is one of the last vestiges of oral tradition; at the Faire we hear and see storytellers, we watch them dance and sing. Folklore is alive and well here, we can watch Robin Hood fight the Sheriff of Nottingham, we can listen to Chaucer stories told aloud. We can even see faeries.

I have been working in outdoor theatre for the past eight years in many capacities, but mostly as an actor. The format of the "Faire" is intimate; there is no separation of onstage and off, and most of what we say as actors is completely improvised. Last year I was approached about directing the children's show, called "Kids Quest". This is the only program written exclusively for young children that the Faire has to offer.

Last year I recognized that the show was too long for young audiences, and often the actors were confused about how to relate to young children. The “faeries” - who are the main characters within the Kids Quest show, are silent characters, performing only in dance, movement and mime. I saw this as an unique and underutilized theatrical device - they are the only silent performers in a very overstimulated, hot, and loud outdoor environment. They are also understandable across many different domains - we are not wading through Elizabethan English language, they move slower and more articulately, giving the audience a chance to catch up. They are soft and unintimidating in a world that is anything but.

#### I. Process- Creating a Believable World of Make-believe as Teacher and Actor

I felt what better way to bring a story to life, but to let these actors tell their own stories. In this way we learn about ourselves, and the characters are brought forth from a place of authenticity, something I feel that is greatly lacking in children’s entertainment. I set off to find the diversity in a small cast that was seemingly homogenous so that we may impart gentle vignettes that empower young children no matter their fluency or ability.

I aim to create a formalized template for work in outdoor theatre. This template utilizes an awareness of child development and child-directed learning as we study at Bank Street but clarified for the actor. The tradition of storytelling at Bank Street is described by Nina Jaffe in her piece *Storytelling and Folk Narrative* from “Revisiting a Progressive Pedagogy”; “Interest and involvement in children’s literature has been part of the developmental-interaction approach from its very inception...Storytelling as part of teacher education has been included in graduate studies at Bank Street College since the

1970s taught both by librarians and professional tellers. A strong emphasis on narrative and folklore is included as well in courses in curriculum and children's literature"(Jaffe 2000 p162).

The goal of interactive theatre in a "theme park" setting such as the one where I work, is to create a believable world of make-believe, utilizing the skills I've learned as a teacher and storyteller. In the classroom setting I have learned to read-aloud to young children, but the art of storytelling goes deeper into my background as an actor. Being an actor means that one is not often using their personal narrative, but rather the story of another, which connects to the oral story tradition and folklore.

As Nina Jaffe states;

"Different from personal narrative, however, is the vast repertoire of tales from myth and folklore...Discovering their connections to this core of narrative-in a form of performance or oral retelling-is often a most challenging, yet rewarding, process. For it is in the transformations of these narratives "from text to tongue" that teachers can find their own true connections to peoples, times and places from "far away and long ago." In so doing, they can model powerfully for their students their belief and confidence in the power and beauty of the singular, individual, human being to communicate a shared vision of symbol, imagination and metaphor" (Jaffe 2000 p 167). These concepts of symbol, imagination and metaphor are what the faeries are all about. They are hyper realistic to the folkloric idea of a faerie, but in order to participate in the narrative, an adult or child needs to use their imagination and recognize within themselves the



metaphor of the fantastical. Even though we are in a theme park, and these are people dressed in costumes, they symbolize a folkloric narrative.

This can be both liberating and harrowing for the young child. As children begin to develop a sense of the real and imaginary, a setting such as the Faire can be at times overwhelming and unsafe-feeling. The faerie characters (or “fae”) although silent and gentle can cause a young child to question what in this world is real. When we do not know the background of a child, or even what has happened in the morning before they entered the Faire, we cannot be sure.

### Playing the Fae

The faeries are a strange little offshoot of the Faire. They generally travel throughout the grounds as a group, or if they are alone they are generally hiding quietly. There is an area of the Faire designated for them, which is shady, cool and quiet compared to the rest of the Faire. The faeries are truly fantasy, we want so much to believe that these beautiful and benevolent creatures exist. They are a part of our human folklore - we see them cross culturally as deities created to explain what we could not understand.

In the context of the Faire, the performance company is in general directed to "never see" the fae, but to live with belief in their existence. The suspended disbelief is that only children can see the faeries. Adult patrons who come with their children will often clamor about and gesture to the characters, but the actors portraying noble men and women will always insist that they cannot "see the faerie".

This creates an interesting dynamic because it puts a lot of power in the hands of the children. Sometimes this is overwhelming if we cannot get them in on "the game".

Realizing when a child is over-stimulated can be difficult for the actor, whether they are playing a faerie or a person. Sometimes the parent is overwhelmed by the atmosphere and may inadvertently disrupt what the actors are trying to create.

I aim to work with my cast of faeries this year to establish what we are trying to create; a safe interaction for young audiences, no matter the developmental level or verbal language barrier. Our show will be authentic to who we are as people, and how we impart that information will be our work not only as actors, but as teachers as well.

#### Casting the Actors-Considering the Impact of Acculturation

What is often lacking in professional theatre is authenticity to culture. Casting directors will often acculturate a role in order to fill it which can be damaging to the audience viewing it. How are we representing groups of people in our work? I sought to create diverse characters based on the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of my actors so that when the script was being written it would richly describe the variation of story within the world. The ethnicities of my actors would inform the folklore we would portray. This is where I met my first hurdle.

The casting of this show has been primarily white for a long time. We do not often see people of color auditioning for roles within the area and era that this theme park seeks to portray. It is unclear if actors of color seeking work do not come to audition because they read the description and say "this does not apply to me"; the company is certainly

inclusive but other socio-cultural pressures may be at play. When it came time to hold auditions I only saw white actors.

This was certainly frustrating in that I felt that I would be unable to include large swaths of folklore because I could not find the population to tell the stories, I felt this would negatively affect the audience I sought to reach. However I recognized that casting characters based on how they “looked” would not only be inaccurate but furthering an institution that one could “judge a book by it’s cover”. Folklore is an expression of a group of people sharing the same system of knowledge, and it would be very hurtful to have these stories represented by the wrong voices.

This may seem strange in a country as ethnically and culturally diverse as the United States, but it has taken generations of American immigration to reach this small level of complacency in acculturation. We don’t even realize it’s happening. Buenker and Ratner writes in his introduction to *Multiculturalism in the United States*;

“Only as time and generations in America passed did a hyphenated nationality label come to be accepted... first generation immigrants holding on to an old identity, second generation immigrants rejecting their origins and accepting an American one, and third-generation immigrants seeking to rediscover their roots in really a process in which the first generation held to a culture defined by factors other than nationality, the second generation identified with the culture of the host country, and the third generation developed a new “hyphenated” identity comprised of elements of both the old country and the new.” (Buenker, Ratner 1992 p 4). Folklore has been passed down through these generations of Americans, and if I were to misrepresent them with different cultures, I am

effectively unraveling the experience of these people who have fought to find a place for themselves in society. That journey is different for each ethnicity and cultural group.

I do not feel that by casting in an ethnically inaccurate light that I am necessarily teaching children that it is okay to do so; but neither is it dispelling the fact that we are acculturating a story. It is morally untrue if not represented with the face of it's people. I feel this is especially true in the realm of folklore, where the systems of oral knowledge have been created over generations within ethnic groups. Upon casting I found that I was going to be unable to describe some of this folklore because the backgrounds weren't there. Thus I decided to work in the positive; while my group of actors looked very much the same, if I asked them the proper questions I could find where to celebrate the differences.

### Building Characters

In our first conversations, I was fascinated to find that many of the actors I hired were reluctant or worried to build a character from the ground up. When I hired them I explained that I had been unable to create a script because I did not know who I would be working with. I had hoped that by having conversations throughout the rehearsal process would allow my actors the ability to think about who they were in relationship to who they were aiming to portray. Fleshing out a character should be rewarding and exciting, but it became clear to me rather quickly that just talking about who we were was not going to allow me to put the stories to paper and allow my actors to bring them to life. In order to create authentic characters, I asked each of my actors in the Kids Quest show and those who were part of the "faerie court" (characters who inhabit the Faire and interact

with children/adults but who are not a part of the Kids Quest) to complete a survey about their cultural and ethnic backgrounds (see appendix).

This survey (along with the Consent Form) served as a very basic entry format into creating the characters which have become a part of the Kids Quest show, as well as serving as an entry point to portrayal of realistic, make believe characters for the entire faerie court. The questions in the survey aim to ask the actor to reflect on where they come from and how they identify themselves. As children are building their own culture and their own sense of self, my actors were asked to do the same, my hope being that it helps them to relate to where young children are in our world.

The first question asks the actor about their ethnic background, and the second asks them to describe their cultural background. I felt this was an important distinction to make as it is a subtlety that most young children don't understand yet, as it is outside their zone of proximal development. In an experimental effort to extend beyond this developmental zone and expose children to deeper ideas of culture and connection, I am asking my actors to consider their backgrounds and how they can relate to the folklore. If they don't relate, that is fine, as I would rather build on authenticity.

The third question asks the actor to consider what background they relate to more. When answering the surveys I found that my actors easily choose which background they more related to, yet often did not articulate why exactly that was what they felt most identified them. Of the six completed surveys, four actors chose that they related more closely to

their cultural background, and two chose that they related most closely with part of their ethnic background.

I feel that this poses a new question I hadn't considered; what experiences make us more apt to identify with our ethnicity vs. our perceived culture?

Some considerations might be made to how the world reacts to our outward appearance, perhaps causing us to identify with what they see as a means of protecting it. Of course we must also consider our families and what they have taught us to identify with. As a young child, I started with a nuclear family model, and in some instances I wonder if this nuclear model caused me to think more closely about where we come from as these were the adults I was interacting with every day of my life. The word "culture" has come to mean so many things to me during my tenure at Bank Street; but perhaps I have not stopped to consider that the term is not so inclusive or so broad to the adult who does not study it within the context of families and children.

There is an important parallel between effective teachers and acting, and that is enthusiasm. When we are acting, we are conveying a story. The actions of the story are propelled throughout via our emotion, i.e., enthusiasm. Teachers are also storytellers, as the actor is. Tauber and Mester write in their book on acting for teachers;

“A teacher’s zest for teaching, like an actor’s zeal for acting, is revealed in his or her displayed enthusiasm...Enthusiasm and passion do not have to take one single form, and they do not always include being loud, having grand hand gestures, or running around the classroom. But they do require that teachers raise their awareness of their own way of being passionate about their material...”( Tauber, Mester 2007 p11). I find that

my background in acting has helped me to reflect on more efficacious ways to utilize instruction in my classroom - many of my ideas have come from this driving enthusiasm I was taught in acting school. I wanted to see how I could translate this parallel to my actors, who I knew already had the enthusiasm but not the teaching know-how.

Once the surveys had been completed, we had a cast meeting to talk about what characters were going to be portrayed. Two of the actors who were hired for the 11 person cast were unable to make the first meeting, and one actor dropped the show when offered a better paying contract elsewhere (which happens often in the theatre world). Three actors were hired later in the rehearsal process as part of the faerie court, but were not included in my thesis project.

The surveys answered many questions for me as I began to write, but also served to enlighten me to a series of questions and complications I had not considered. I noticed, as perhaps part of my own bias, that I did not consider the fact that some of the actors may not know much about their ethnic backgrounds. This made creating the folkloric stories perhaps more questionable, I began to ask myself the question - "Is it more honest for the actor to portray who they feel they are based on the sum of their experience even if that is not who they are ethnically? When does it become acculturation?". I cannot pretend that I have found the answers to these very deeply seated socio-cultural questions, but I can describe the process of discovery within my cast.

### Discovery - Who We Are and What that Means

Some of the actors playing faeries are not part of the formal show. This means that their names are never spoken aloud for an audience (unless prompted by a speaking character). This can be a challenge; how do we impart information without our voices when that is how a population speaks? Learning to think beyond the script and beyond spoken language is harrowing, but some actors shine when given the opportunity. Learning to explain who you are outside of your primary mode of communication forces us into the perspective of the emergent bilingual child. How do we get across our meaning when our languages are different? Ryan and Lily had this challenge along with the fact that their characterizations, stories and names are not bolstered by spoken language.

“Ryan” and “Lily” are a couple both in the show and romantically outside of it. They also share a lot of common background. They both lost their mothers to cancer at young ages (Ryan at 21 and Lily at 13). As they consider their childhoods, this plays a large part in shaping who they have become and the relationships they now have with their families. This experience, coupled with mental health complications have grown them into rather quiet people, who love and relate to each other very deeply. In a large setting (such as with all 140 cast members of the Faire) they are much less likely to speak. In the safe space that is our smaller cast ( of between 6 and 9) they feel more safe to express themselves.

### "RYAN"

"Ryan" is not part of Kids Quest, but is portraying one of the fae characters that inhabit the Faire and so he took part in the survey. He is a man in his mid-twenties, quiet and



unassuming. Ryan was part of the faerie court last year, but was hired late in the rehearsal process, so we did not know each other incredibly well. He was more than happy to return and become more involved than he had been previously, and so dove straight into the work.

Ryan was adopted as a very young child, and does not know much about his ethnic background. He is aware that he is 50% Native American, but is unaware of which tribe. He is aware that the other half is mixed Latino. He was raised in an Irish/Polish household, and in terms of identity he says " (I more identify as) White, as it is essentially how I have been raised more so than what my appearance might dictate" (survey interview, 5/30/2015).

Ryan briefly answered a lot of my questions in the survey - they are very factual and brief. I am unsure if the way I worded the questions could have played into his comfort level in answering them. I realized when attempting to create a character for him that, although I would love to write about the Native American part of his ethnicity, it was not really a part of his culture, nor was it something he identified with at this time. In addition, it would not be socially responsible, because we are not sure what tribe of American Indian Ryan stems from. Ryan's Latino side is similar; these are not the cultural and ethnic systems of knowledge that he grew up in, and thus does not identify with.

I did not want to create a story based around Ryan's ethnic identity because it had so little to do with how Ryan perceived himself. In respect of who Ryan is, I chose instead

to base his character around what he wished to play; - a peacock! At first glance, perhaps this does not seem to play into the work I am working to do, but let's look deeper. I want to respect Ryan's privacy as his peer and fellow human being; how would a peacock work?

Ryan's expression of self is delightfully and comfortably gender fluid. He will happily tell you where he bought his "guy liner", or his pink t-shirt which states "I don't Sweat - I Sparkle". When I think of Ryan, I recognize him as beautiful, in many senses of the word. He is not afraid to adorn himself with paint or to wear outrageous colors and combinations. He self-defined as "Eccentric, creative and free-spirited" (interview survey 5/30/2015). Not letting any pre-defined term of masculinity or societally driven gender based behavior is something that is easily read in Ryan and this is just the environment to facilitate that sense of self, uninhibited. Ryan is happy to express and display himself to the onlooker, much as a peacock would, and he does it with ease and honesty. This is how Ryan is choosing to describe himself.

### **"LILY"**

Lily is playing the role of the faerie queen, another character who is not part of the Kids Quest show but is part of the landscape of the Faire and one of the faerie inhabitants. She along with her partner Ryan came into the rehearsal process late last year and so I did not know them very well, as aforementioned.

Lily's role was pre-determined by the entertainment directors, so there was less leeway for her creativity, but I do not feel this stopped her. Lily grew up in a middle class

suburban area, but identifies more with her "individualistic" upbringing- her parents (a non-practicing Christian father and a Jewish mother) "...used to be self-described "hippies" and encouraged individuality" (survey interview 5/30/2015). Lily described herself as a "...European mutt, but I believe my strongest ancestry is ethnically Jewish/German-Jewish, French and Irish" (survey interview, 5/30/2015). We decided to borrow a folkloric story from her French background, the "Dames Blanches".

The Dames Blanches legend comes from Normandy. Lily's character is based around La Dame d'Aprigny, described by Thomas Keightley in his book *The Fairy Mythology*, who would appear in a ravine at the Rue Quentin at Bayeux in the southern part of Normandy. This faerie creature would incite a human to dance with her (Keightley 1892 p 475). This is a wonderful, playable action for Lily; asking children to dance with her, through gesture and modeling is simple and well appreciated by audiences.

Lily describes herself as "Creative, quiet, emotional, contemplative and aloof" (interview survey 5/30/2015). In a more traditional theatre setting, even within the greater performance company which involves big voices and big, improvised acting choices, Lily's strengths may have been overlooked. Yet as she is contemplative, she is focused on her audience and invites them in to the stories she tells through her poses, her gesture and her general engagement with the audience.

Ryan and Lily's stories are continuing to grow as they find themselves throughout the rehearsal process. They stand in a unique position; their stories are never told aloud during the Faire. However, I do not feel this leaves them devoid of "voice". How we

express ourselves when we have no voice - whether we are born in such a way, or if we choose not to speak, or maybe we are frightened - should not put a damper on how we are heard. Lily and Ryan move throughout their day with poise and grace, as they know themselves and have begun to discuss it in a safe environment. How they choose to share themselves is unique to them.

### The Kids Quest

There are four faeries (originally five, one left for a higher paying contract elsewhere) whose stories are shared daily to children via the Kids Quest Show, which is narrated by a human character. These actors are learning to work with all children - developing an awareness of developmental variation and considering interaction with children in a positive light rather than from the deficit model of thinking.

The characters and actors who pertain to the script are described immediately following the script. The script itself will be described in more detail once the descriptions and backgrounds of the actors themselves have been more fully discussed.

### The Script: Timeframe and the Personal Narrative of the Actors

Kids Quest! A Scavenger Hunt

(Ages 4-10)

*\*Note: Narrator must always wait for a response, visual or verbal, from children when they are prompted*

*The FAERIES are hidden within the faerie glade as we begin.*

**FEYA**: God ye good den and welcome to the faerie glen. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Feya Nitznootz, faerie whisperer. I am here to help the good people of Sterling to learn about their local magical wildlife! Gadzooks! The hour is here! Good people, wherefore art the Kids Questers?! Raise your pinky pinky fingers (**demonstrates**) if you are part of my Kids Quest! Wiggle your pinky fingers! If you are in the Kids Quest show me thumbs up! *Whispers*: If you are part of the Kids Quest shake your head up and down (**demonstrates**) Shake your head yes if you have seen the faeries here. Fantastic! I am so glad some of you have seen faeries, because I need your help (**shows book prop**). I have lost the cover to my book! Until I find the pieces I will never know what the title of my story is, and I will not be able to see the faeries. But! Children are very special - because you can always see the faeries, even without the book! Can you help me find the pieces so I can see the faeries once again? (**pause**) Oh most excellent! We must first get ready to enter the faerie glen! Find a spot where you can see me.

First (**one finger visual**) we must open our ears (**demonstrates**) so the faeries know we are listening. We must open our eyes to show we are looking (**demonstrates rubbing temples**). We must get our hands ready as well! (**demonstrates pressing hands together- in “bind”**)

Second (**two finger visual**) we must clap twice to let the faeries know we want to see them. If they are here, they will answer back with 2 claps. Are you ready? *Whispers* Copy my hands. (**demonstrates**). Quick! Open your ears! (**demonstrates**)

**FAERIES:** (repeat the clap)

**FEYA:** I think I heard them! Let's try another clap to make sure! Let's all clap three times! Ready? (**demonstrates three claps**)

**FAERIES:** (repeat the clap)

**FEYA:** The faeries are here! Are you ready to enter the faerie glade? If you are ready, touch your nose! (**pause for reaction**). We will take ten tip toe or quiet steps into the faerie glade together. This way, we will not frighten the faeries away. (**the group takes 10 steps, FEYA leads count.**). Now, let's give ourselves a squeeze (**demonstrates**). If we wait very calmly here, the faeries may come out.

The **Erlking** is the first to appear from his hiding place

**FEYA:** Does anyone see a faerie? (**pause**) I cannot see the faerie, so I cannot tell you who it is. Fie! Pardon. WAIT! An idea. I need a child to tell me what the faerie looks like. Touch your nose if you can tell me one thing about how the faerie looks. What color skin does it have? (**pause to collect answer**). (*FEYA flips through her book based on the children's description. She finds the page about the Erlking*) Does he look like this?

AHA! this faerie must be the newly crowned Erlking! But I need a child to ask if this is indeed the Erlking. Touch your shoulders if you would like to ask, “Are you the Erlking?” (**pauses to choose, child**) Did he shake his head “yes”? Excellent! (*FEYA reads from the book*) It says here that everyone thinks he’s an unseelie faerie (that means mean) but he’s really not. Sometimes he gets upset when people cut down his trees. He works very hard to plant new ones, but he is not always fast enough. Some of the old stories say he eats children, but that’s not true! He is a vegetarian. That’s why he keeps planting the trees. Nobody ever listens to him! So he took the puzzle piece, because he did not want to talk to humans anymore. (*Feya stops reading, upset*) What?! (*reading*) “He will only consider giving the puzzle piece back if the children pinky promise to be gentle with my trees and not cut them down!”

**ERLKING:** (Nods, crosses his arms)

**FEYA:** Let me get this straight, we just have to pinky promise to be careful with the trees and you will give back my puzzle piece?

**ERLKING:** (thinks, very slowly nods “yes”)

**FEYA:** Who is brave enough to pinky promise! Shout “Aye!” and hold your pinky high, To the Erlking this we promise ye; we shall be gentle with every tree! Oh my stars I hope this works...

**ERLKING:** (very slowly and deliberately hands a child the puzzle piece and then points to FEYA, gesturing to the child to give it to her. When the child does, ERLKING offers a high five)

**FEYA:** Oh! I can see him! It worked! I can see! Erlking, the greatest thanks for giving me back the puzzle piece! I am so glad you have decided to join us. Could you count for us how many puzzle pieces are left to find?

**ERLKING:** (*using fingers, very deliberately counts to 3, the children are invited to join in*)

**FEYA:** Three are left to find! Wondrous well! Who else should we search for, Erlking? (*the ERLKING takes Freya's book, and finds the page with WILLA ZEE WISP*) Oh yes, Willa! She is always traveling, I have not seen her in many years. She travels far and wide, bringing warmth and fire wherever she- (*ERLKING becomes upset*) Oh Erlking, I know, I am sorry. She doesn't MEAN to set fire to your trees, she can just be a little -

**WILLA:**(*WILLA has been creeping out into the open, with a finger over her mouth meaning "shh", she is dropping a trail of red jewels/ beads and has been sneaking up beside ERLKING. On "little" she twirls and tumbles, falling into ERLKING's arms. She sneezes and glitter/a puff of flame is emitted. ERLKING shakes his head*)



**FEYA:** Erlking! What is going on? (she sniffs the air) something smells like a campfire... (ERLKING drops WILLA) Wait! Children, do you see another faerie? (pause) Huzzah! It must be Willa! Willa, could I please have your puzzle piece.

**WILLA:** *nods, and reaches into her pouch for the puzzle piece, but cannot find it. Willa starts to cry)*

**FEYA:** What's wrong? Children, is Willa sad? (pause) Oh no! Erlking, what's happened? (ERLKING points to his puzzle piece, then to WILLA and motions "no") Children it seems Willa has lost her puzzle piece. (ERLKING points out something in FEYA's book) Oh, of course! Wherever Willa goes, she leaves golden coals that turn to jewels. We only need follow her trail of jewels to find her puzzle piece! Children, follow Willa, for I cannot see her! She will help you find the path!

**WILLA:** *(WILLA leads the children along her path and they find the puzzle piece, WILLA gives her puzzle piece to ERLKING, who hands it to FEYA)*

**FEYA:** *(smiles as WILLA comes into view)* Oh my faerie friend, how I have missed you. Children, if you ever want to show Willa that you love her, you can do this *(FEYA and WILLA touch pointer fingers, a la E.T.)*. Fire is very hot, so you should touch just her finger where it is cool. Also, you should always ASK for a hug FIRST *( FEYA opens her arms to hug WILLA, WILLA obliges)*. We have found two of the pieces! Everyone cheer huzzah! HUZZAH! We need to find two **(demonstrates)** more faeries and their puzzle

pieces! We should check the book to see if there is a page we have not looked at. (**asks child to pick a new page**)

**FEYA:** Thank you for picking a new page! This faerie is named Lorelei Langli. She comes from the sea, in the north where it is very cold. I believe she is hiding her puzzle piece because it reminds her of a seashell and she misses the sea. Perhaps if we can remind her of the sea, she will come out and give us the puzzle piece. Who would like to help find the water nymph Lorelei? Let us pretend to be the sea. ( **the following is choreographed for the children to follow**) : First we must make the sound of the sea (**demonstrates, shhh**)

“Twas Friday morn when we set sail

And we were not far from the land

When the captain, he spied a lovely mermaid

With a comb and a glass in her hand

O the ocean's waves will roll

And the stormy winds will blow

While we poor sailors go skipping to the top

And the landlubbers lie down below”

(LORELEI has been listening from her hiding spot, and she comes to join the children in their movement. She has brought her puzzle piece, which she hands to FEYA)

**FEYA:** Beautiful water nymph, Lorelei Langli, straight from the Danish seashore! (the two bow to each other)

**LORELEI:** (greet ERLKING and WILLA, and gestures as though she is looking for someone)

**FEYA:** I see Lorelei, we have the Erlking who loves the land, Willa who loves the fire, and you, you love the sea (flips through her book) Is this who you are looking for?

**LORELEI:** (nods emphatically, holds the book high above her head to show the children the illustration before handing the book back to FEYA)

**FEYA:** There is but one faerie left to find (FEYA shows the final page) Siofra Cel! The Brownie! Brownies love to clean when nobody is watching, but they're terribly rare. Siofra not only can clean but she loves to fix things as well. I know! If we show her the broken puzzle, perhaps she will come out to fix it up. Then our story will be complete, and I will know the title of the book! Here, I am going to lay the puzzle pieces out in front of us. Now, let's count to four, so our fourth and final faerie will appear! (**count aloud or show with hands**) (SOIFRA appears)

**FEYA:** Soifra! Can you fix our puzzle?

**SOIFRA:** (carefully places puzzle back together, and gives it to FEYA)

**FEYA:** Here it is! The completed story cover! And the title is "The Faeries of Sterling Forest, written by the Kids Quest"! WE DID IT! (looks through book) There is one more page we forgot to read (shows children a picture of a treasure chest). It says "for helping

us find our stories, the faeries have left a special gift for each child in the treasure chest.

Thank you for believing!

### Time Frame and the Narratives of the Actors

The show itself, without the addition of a young audience, runs fifteen minutes. This is considered rather short from the perspective of the performance company and its actors. As a teacher of young children, I understand and wanted to provide the opportunity for the audience to interact with the characters and give voice to the narrative should they choose to do so. As every show within the Faire is slated to run thirty minutes, I structured my show to run fifteen with the flexibility to accommodate for audiences who may need more time to fully experience the show.

The following are the personal narratives of the actors within Kids Quest. Direct quotes come from the interview surveys found in the appendix.

### **"STEPHEN"**

Stephen plays the first faerie to appear, the Erlking or "Erlkonig". The Erlking stems from German folklore, which is Stephen's background. In the traditional folklore, most famously in eponymous poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Erlking is described as a monster who eats children (Schwarm 2014). For the purposes of the show, we tweaked the story to make a more modern re-telling, based on Stephen's experiences.

Stephen comes from a family of professional actors, but is the only one who chose not to pursue the profession (with the exception of this show, which he chose to pursue more

out of his love for immersive fantasy, such as roleplaying games and video games).

Stephen is a self-described "black sheep"; he grew up to be a computer programmer and a part-time actor. Stephen has loved improvised stories from a young age, he described in the interview survey;

" ...I remember that my father used to tell me stories of the adventures of Splllbat and his dog Red. These he literally made up on the spot every night. Basically he was an adventurer in a fantasy-esque world that would just travel to the most amazing places to meet strange creatures and monsters to learn the secrets of life." (interview survey, 5/30/2015).

The Erlking is a gentle giant (Stephen is our tallest actor) and helps us sort and travel through our tale. Stephen is very exacting as a person; he enjoys clear directives and will work towards a goal as efficaciously as possible. He described himself as " Stalwart, Loyal and Passionate" (interview survey 5/30/2015) and those characteristics are shining through as the Erlking sticks with Feya and the group.

Stephen's Erlking is slow moving, and heavily natural. He is based along the idea of an "Ent" from Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" (a favorite of Stephen's). Stephen was concerned during the rehearsal process that children might be frightened of him.

Stephen's concern of being frightening is born out of his compassion and connection to children who may be seen as anxious, being a child who worked very hard against being frightened of the dark and other creatures borne out of his imagination. One of Stephen's thoughts on making himself seem more accessible was to allow the actress who is playing the Faerie Whisperer to ride along on his back. His hope is that children will see him as

friendly by allowing such a naturally friendly, small and appealing character to ride along, piggy-back style. Stephen's self awareness is helpful during the rehearsal process. He has never worked extensively with children before, but he is asking questions and taking steps towards awareness of young audiences.

### **"BETTE"**

Bette plays Willa ze Wisp in the Kids Quest, the second faerie to enter the scene. The name is based on the will-o'-the-wisp, a ghostly light attested to in folklore throughout Europe (Rudkin 1938 p 46). Bette is reprising her role from last year (playing the "fire faerie") and is also serving as assistant director to me. I have worked with Bette quite extensively, she has always been a positive and hardworking force in the cast. She is in her mid-twenties and works as a circus coach and waitress during the week.

The interview survey was very difficult for Bette to answer. In another instance where I could have done better to check my privilege, Bette approached me about addressing her background. She felt unsure of what to write because a lot of her personal history is unknown. In terms of her ethnic background, Bette wrote, "As far as I know I am mostly Irish, with touches of Polish mixed in. I don't know much more than that. My mother raised me in a gypsy-like fashion with lots of traveling and working where we traveled" (interview survey 5/30/2015).

Bette also struggled with the cultural background question;

" This is a very hard question for me to answer. I was brought up pretty loosely. Religion did not play a big part in my life. I was raised as an only child despite having siblings much older than me. Family was also pretty absent from my bringing-up. My

mother was really all I had. She taught me to fend for myself and I had to grow up a lot faster than normal. I found myself through circus and the RenFaire." (interview survey 5/30/2015).

I had not considered how difficult it might be for my actors to articulate who they are. After some discussion, Bette decided to base her character off the Romani people, who are semi-nomadic. This is not actually a part of her known ethnic background, but it is how she identifies herself. Bette has worked hard to create herself from scratch, even having her name legally changed as a young adult.

In terms of Kids Quest, Bette's character Willa is a maelstrom of movement and color. She is literally fiery. Willa is also the only faerie who we name an emotion to. Willa shows sadness, which I feel is part of Bette; the part that is frustrated because she needed to grow up so fast and it has taken so much hard work. Willa's industrious nature proves helpful in the show; the "glittery coal trail" she creates helps the audience find the puzzle piece. This trail is also characteristic of Bette, you remember her wherever she goes, her charisma leaves a mark.

## **"EMILY"**

Emily is the youngest actor in the Kids Quest, currently pursuing her bachelor's degree. Emily's college experiences thus far have been very harrowing to her, despite being a very open person, Emily's roommate invaded her privacy, hurting her on a deep level. College is a very uneasy place for Emily right now, and she is not sure what she will be

doing come September. The uncertainty and hurt in Emily is palpable, while she is self-deprecating, she is working hard to show a brave face around everyone else. Despite this, she is working hard to try and make friends and trust people again, persisting against her own anxiety. Emily is playing the role of Lorelei Langli, the sea sprite.

Emily missed some of the first rehearsals because she was visiting Denmark with her family, which is in fact part of her ethnic background. I chose to base Emily's character around Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid character, as she had previously played the "water faerie". Lorelei is a name that Emily chose for herself, the name coming from German folklore, the original name of her character being "Larkspur". "Langli" is a small island off the coast of the Danish sea, where Emily's character hails from. Emily was very happy to pick up where she left off, and to try the new and different ideas that I had for the cast.

Emily's natural spontaneity and genuine love of children is something I have already seen peripherally; children recognize her from seasons previous at the Faire, and will flock to her, happy to see someone they already identify as "friend". Emily has her own opinions on how to play her character, and is a self-starter. Her matter of fact nature shows through in Lorelei, who joins the children in their dance and song. I continue to watch her gain her own voice, even if she is not speaking.

## **"ANN"**

Ann works in a therapeutic nursery during the week, which has made her an asset to this process. Her basic skills with children are strong. She is a woman in her early twenties



playing a faerie for the first time, although she is not unfamiliar with the culture of the Faire. She was raised in an Irish/Scottish Christian background and her ethnicity is "...varied...including Irish, Swiss, German and Spanish." (interview survey 5/30/2015). She went to Catholic schools growing up and states that; "I definitely relate more to my cultural background despite leaving the faith, as I did not know my full ethnic background until a couple years ago when someone in my family decided to do all the research to follow our lines back" (interview survey 5/30/2015).

Ann was one of my actors who easily grasped the concept of designing herself as a faerie. Utilizing her Irish background, Ann created (and named) her character, Soifra Cei, the Brownie. The name "Soifra Cei" comes from the Irish Gaelic, and it pronounced "Sheef-ra K-eye". It means little sprite who is keeper of the keys. Ann created her character as a faerie who helps to tidy and fix things, which is part of the Irish tradition of Brownies (Keightley 1892 p 358).

Ann's character within the context of the Kids Quest, is the faerie who pieces the problem together. She is showing us how to be helpful, by taking the clues that the children have already found during the Kids Quest and, with their help, completing the task. Ann is a very quiet person naturally; she is not quite as bombastic as the other personalities in my cast, which is what I appreciate as her director.

I know that Ann is used to working with pre-verbal children, and knows the importance of modeling, of allowing children the time to help where applicable. Her character does not have a lot of description, because her action within the plot speaks louder than what I

could use to describe her. Ann doesn't fix problems, she sees where things can work and be whole.

### Walking through the Veil - Playing the Faerie Whisperer

#### **"POLLY"**

In the pagan tradition of Samhain (celebrated on October 31st), the concept of the "Veil" is described. The veil is the invisible separation between the dead and the living, what is and what has been. It is an entryway into what we might call "magic". Playing the faerie whisperer is walking between the two worlds; they can "see" the faeries, where the general populace of adults (both patron and actor) cannot. The question of reality is more childlike for this character, what they see and imagine they experience viscerally, as a child does when playing make believe.

When I was looking to cast the Kids Quest show, I had been looking for an actor who was bilingual, preferably in Spanish. Polly became the exception to what I sought, because of her interaction with the language in call-backs. When I asked Polly to read for the Kids Quest, I gave her the instruction to find words to put "purposeful gesture" to, so that the visual would serve to bolster the meaning of the spoken word.

Polly was clear and purposeful in her movement, so much so that if I covered my ears I could still glean meaning from what her movements were telling me. Her face is animated, and her expressions correlate to her intended meaning. If I were a child who was unfamiliar with the language being spoken, or if I had a language based special need (such as a language processing disorder) her clear, visual cues would help me to

understand. If I was unsure as to the tone of the show, whether a character was happy or upset, I would be able to read her expression (provided I already had a vocabulary for expressions and their meanings).

Polly is not bilingual in Spanish, but she does speak Hebrew, though she would not say she is fluent. In her call-back audition, she was able to use Hebrew words in place of the English words in repeated phrases that children would be able to follow along with. This ability to transfer meaning across multiple language systems while using gesture and emotion for communication, made Polly a very clear choice for the role.

Polly identifies as both ethnically and culturally Jewish:

“My family is Jewish, which is neat because it counts as an ethnicity, a culture, a religion/set of ethics, etc. My nuclear family and I are Reform - my dad's a Reform Rabbi so I grew up steeped in it... I actively don't identify with Russia etc. (six of Polly's great-great grandparents were from the second wave of Jewish immigration from Russia in the 1900s - what is now Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine) because Jews were not allowed to be full members/citizens of these countries at this time, and because my great-grandmother specifically told us not to!”(interview survey 5/30/2015). This became interesting as we started discussing Polly's cultural background in the largest context of the Faire.

Polly walks the line between the faerie world and the "real" world of the Faire- which is set in 16th century, rural England. This was not a safe place historically for Jewish people, and at first Polly seemed unsure how she should play her character in terms of

accuracy. This is always a very ugly area when we consider creating our stories at the Faire - if we are striving for historical accuracy, Polly would not have been openly Jewish in Anglican England. I felt that overriding the historical implications was appropriate in this context because it allows Polly to be more genuine. In fact, her name in Hebrew, "Feya Nitznootz" translates to "Faerie Sparkle".

I was happy for Polly to find a way to incorporate her culture into her portrayal of the Faerie Whisperer. Polly will be performing the show with some Hebrew phrases and words translated into the text. First she will say the phrase in English, with a gesture to accompany it. Next she will repeat the phrase in Hebrew with the same gesture, thus correlating the meaning to the phrase no matter the language.

### The Language of Kids Quest

When I originally directed the Kids Quest show last year, the major issue I took to was its length and use of language. When we sat down as a cast and did a cold reading of the show, it ran thirty five minutes. This length seemed far too long because the audience was not being asked to contribute very much to the plot, though the story itself was engaging.

I watched the Kids Quest and found that many children, namely the ones who were less likely to yell to be heard, would not be very engaged in volunteering answers for the show. They were passive, and were able to follow along with what the actors were asking them to do ( last year there was an "evil villain" in the form of a pirate). Most of the time

the children seemed to take cues from their parents or off each other, but many did not seem to be engaged or following the show as much as they might be.

Last year I did make some edits to the show, cutting a lot of dialogue that I found extraneous and working to create deliberate tableaux with the faeries (for example, having them demonstrate how to do "ring around the rosie"). This way, children would be able to recognize the visual cue and possibly contribute an answer when prompted. The timing of the show was cut down to between fifteen and twenty minutes, depending on the size of the crowd.

This year, I decided to create a show that deliberately aimed to engage children, as we would in the early childhood classroom. I started by considering visuals. The book prop, with its puzzle piece cover is meant as a focusing and, dare I say, pre-literacy tool. The pictures inside the book are the pictures of the faeries that the children can see, but Feya cannot.

Feya must ask the children to describe the illustration, so she can use context clues to discover which faerie is which. The puzzle pieces which Soifra must place together in the end (and she will need the audience's help) require that children use visual problem solving skills and strategy to help Soifra place the puzzle pieces where they belong on the front of the book. If Soifra places a piece in wrong, the audience will have to describe to her how to fix her error.

These are important pre-academic skills that children should practice for school readiness, but there is also the question of accommodation for children who need it. Feya differentiates her instruction and description for her audience by providing clear directives visually. Within the script, wherever there is bold face type, Feya has chosen (with my input) how to give a visual cue to help the audience. These visual cues are often coupled with language to further clarify the meaning. Feya also uses different voices to bring different kinds of engagement into play. Sometimes she whispers what the audience must do, and sometimes she is boisterous and loud. Much like in the classroom, Feya uses both speech and visual to ensure engagement.

Feya's directions ( such as asking the children to help her count, either by using their voice or fingers) not only clarify the direction, but it cuts down on the need for words. Young children are often lost when they are given too many directives in one step, or when there is too much verbal language being used. The motor tasks that Feya models and asks of the children are simple and broken down visually. This allows for children who are struggling with motor planning to participate without being left behind. Feya incorporates both gross and fine motor tasks into her directives.

Sometimes the directive such as "wiggle your pinky" is not only meant to allow children who are less verbal/nonverbal to participate, it is also asking the child to focus their energy on a small task, together. The children should have a distinct sense that by following these small motor tasks, they are in fact sharing in the faeries' system of knowledge. They are a part of the magic. The movements should all have meaning; the

faeries' directions are all given in parenthesis because they do not speak, and the actions themselves are meaningful.

The faeries lend themselves to helping children who are less verbal engage with the show. Each of their movements has been slowed down or choreographed deliberately to allow extra time for children to process what is happening during the show. They are nearly completely visual, whenever one of these characters seeks to convey a need, they must do so with a facial expression or a prop, or with motions. In rehearsals with the faeries, we focus on making our actions specific, so the meaning behind them can be understood. When Willa becomes upset and sits down and pouts, we are familiar with the scenario. Feya even asks to prompt; "Is Willa sad?".

Whenever children are asked to verbally answer a question or attend to a task, the faeries are there to move slowly and serve as active listeners to the children. The fact that the faeries are reliant on the children to be seen or heard gives the children power and responsibility. Last year I often saw children trying to protect the faeries from the "mean pirate captain". It is amazing to watch young children begin to empathize with these delicate creatures, who are actually humans in make-up.

The Kids Quest aims to use Differentiated instruction in order to reach a broader range of children. As described by Gayle H. Gregory and Carolyn Chapman in "Differentiated Instructional Strategies";

“ A *differentiated classroom* is one in which the teacher responds to the unique needs of students...content, process and product are things that are differentiated in a

classroom. The content is what is taught. The way a learner interprets, adapts, and finds ownership is the process. The product shows the learner's personal interpretation and what he or she knows. Differentiated instruction gives a variety of options to successfully reach targeted standards. It meets learners where they are..." (Gregory, Chapman 2007 p 2-3). This why the tasks and questions presented in the Kids Quest Scavenger hunt utilize more than one way to participate. The actors are also expected to look for solutions in order to help children who are struggling.

I wanted to build a sense of community when children come to take part on the Kids Quest. There is no villain in my show. Feyra has a problem that can be solved as long as she has some help. Working together to help her identify the faeries she cannot see and completing the scavenger hunt helps to keep children from becoming competitive. I would rather the audience seek understanding than run each other over in an effort to complete a task.

It should be noted that the storylines of my actors are only briefly touched upon in the Kids Quest. This is something I struggled with, because with all the thought they've put into becoming these characters, I wanted to make sure it was showcased. However, at the end of the day, the modern folktale is itself the Kids Quest. Many of the folktales that my actors draw from are timeless, but perhaps in that timelessness we have less meaning for modern children. It is true I could have placed more narrative into the show, but would it have been too much language?



Finding a place for these characters in a setting that is already saturated with verbal stories is difficult, and I recognize the beauty of what the Kids Quest is at the end of the day; an extension of the oral tradition. The audience is able to create and take part in a story that is all their own. They can leave the show feeling that they have been "seen" by the faeries, and acknowledged. We are living in an era where we have less focus and less time for what is being said in front of us, presented in front of us. We are living in an era where the stories we experience happen mostly behind a screen. The exception to this general rule I feel is in the early childhood classroom, where we move and play, read books, and actively listen. The Kids Quest is meant to mirror that environment, the child is leading and we are listening.

### Working with Children

The Faire is a wonderful place to interact with children, but many of the actors are unsure of how to do it. Young children are reactive, but knowing what the reaction will be can be difficult. In an effort to make it easier for actors to know how to interact with young children, I have designed a workshop detailing some of the finer points of working with young children.

There are some deep similarities between actors and teachers, the ones that I think about most are actors and teachers should both be careful observers and active listeners. In an acting scene, the most important person is the other person one is acting with. In our performance context, this is the patron or child. We are not sure what they are going to say, so we must practice active listening.

Active listening is not just listening to a verbal response; it is also being aware of a child's body language, of their facial affect, of the way they move through space. In order to actively listen, a child must know all of the steps that are involved in listening to another person. Spooner and Woodcock explain why learning to listen is so crucial in their book “Teaching Children to Listen: A Practical Approach to Developing Children’s Listening Skills”;

“..learning to listen is vital in developing the ability to play and interact with others successfully. It underpins the development of understanding language and talking. Listening skills are necessary to acquire all the speech sounds we need to use when talking. Later, when starting school, all these foundation blocks need to be in place in order for children successfully to develop literacy skills.” (Spooner, Woodcock, 2010 p 4). Interacting with the characters at the Faire involves a lot of active listening, in order to take in what is happening, what is being described and/or what is being asked of the child. Actors can help in developing listening skills by being aware of developmental differences when interacting with young children.

The difference between a child being uncomfortable and an adult patron being uncomfortable is immense. A child does not often have the social prowess to remove themselves from a situation that makes them worried, frightened, or uncomfortable. This can often lead to tears in what is intended to be a friendly, actor-audience interaction.

Knowing when to back down from an interaction is important, but knowing how to follow through with one can be even more so. We must always, as actors, take the lead in an improvised situation, and we must always know how and when to end it. Generally,

with a young child, the engagement does not have to be very long to make an impact (and can be otherwise jarring on their finite attention span).

I compiled a simple list of "do's and don'ts" for working with young children. This is to serve as clarification and guidelines for my actors within the faerie troupe, but also with the performance company at large.

### **Guidelines to Consider : Working with Young Children in Interactive Theatre**

#### **DO:**

- **Use a softer "outside voice"** - oftentimes a child will have a more sensitive ear than the average adult.
- **Use fewer words, more slowly** - The fewer words you need, the easier it will be for a young child to understand what you are saying or asking.
- **Maintain distance, keep yourself out of arm's reach** - This allows the child to feel more safe. If they sense you are impinging on their space, it may frighten them.
- **Get on the child's level** - kneel down to eye-level with the child. It will be easier for them to focus on your face and words
- **Check in with caregiver** - Make sure you are not making the child's caregiver uncomfortable. Some patrons will be more willing to play than others.

- **If a child responds, provide adequate time to answer** - Don't cut off a child, especially if they are struggling to get the words out. Let them finish.
- **Listen, listen, listen!** - Sometimes young children are difficult to understand. Ask them to repeat if necessary, but wager a guess if you are confused.
- **Use simple language** - Young children are still working to acquire fluency in their primary language(s). The overlaying of Elizabethan language (i.e., thee, thou thine) can become tricky. Make sure to convey meaning when you speak.
- **Keep your hands to yourself** - Do not hug a child unprompted. Err on the side of caution; maintain personal space at all times. Offer a "high-five", most children will feel comfortable with this brief amount of contact.
- **Be courteous, even if a child is doing the wrong thing** - If a child is climbing on the rocks, let the child and the caregiver know this is unsafe

#### **DON'T:**

- **Pick up a child** - This is an invasion of the child and the families' privacy. It is also a liability.
- **Finish the child's sentences** - Processing language is difficult, especially with a new person. If you finish a child's sentence for them, they will learn not to answer. Ask them if they need help.
- **Belittle or shame a child** - Shame is incredibly damaging, it teaches a child to feel bad about themselves. Find a positive interaction. If you cannot, walk away from the negative one.
- **Speak overly-loud** - A big, booming voice may be construed as "mean".
- **Interrupt a family if a child is upset** - Allow the caregivers to handle the situation unless it looks unsafe

- **Reprimand** - If patrons are allowing their children to do something unsafe, let them know in a courteous fashion. Never reprimand the child; that is not your job. Tell security if the patrons do not cease this behavior.

## II. Research and Reflection

### The Argument for Folklore /Oral Stories

Kids Quest has been designed to utilize folklore as a vessel for storytelling. But why use folklore? How is folklore relevant to today's children? How do we make it accessible to the widest range of children possible? Using traditional storytelling techniques, the Kids Quest at the Faire has become a "modern folklore" - using an overlay of old stories and their ideas to create new stories and connect children to live storytelling. The silent nature of the faeries can also be explored within the creative arts therapy modalities, namely drama therapy.

### Actor and Playwright: Authenticity for Affirmation

Paula Crimmens writes of the use of traditional stories; " We can choose traditional stories that mirror aspects of individuals in the group and thus affirm their experiences... A student's cultural identity may also be affirmed by the use of a story from his own culture" (Crimmens 2006 p 27). Although the faeries do not speak, they are coming from the character work/background of authentic storytelling. The actors themselves are learning how to affirm themselves within this troupe; as they create themselves they create the story we will share with our audience. My hope is that children coming to participate in this show will find modes of interaction, affirmation, and perhaps even familiarity, in these characters.

Although the characters and audience will hopefully find parallels and familiarities, the distance that using a traditional, magical archetype provides makes it feel safer for children to interact with the story. From *Drama Therapy and Storymaking in Special Education*; "Traditional stories address issues in an indirect way, as they are firmly

located in the far away and long ago...working with myth and traditional stories performs the function of distancing and providing emotional safety. The student can choose to identify with the characters and their dilemmas or not." (Crimmens 2006 p 28). Using the scaffolding of traditional stories to create these magical characters allows a wide range of children, who may otherwise feel unsafe to interact based on personal experience or due to an exceptional need, to interact with the Faerie.

Kids Quest does not contain an overt moral quandary or lesson, as many traditional stories do. I felt this would not be coming from an authentic place as a playwright. I also wanted to consider the varying developmental levels of my audience; if I chose a traditional story with a lot of nuance and metaphor the story stands the possibility of losing its meaning and relevance to children who would have a hard time understanding. In an effort to be inclusive, I wanted to write a show which would focus on working in a cohesive group and forming a community, if even for a short time.

#### Tasks and Props within Kids Quest

As the faeries do not speak, I had to consider how best to move the plot along and implement action. I did not want to use too many words in consideration of my audience. A scavenger hunt model had, as aforementioned, been used in the past for the Kids Quest, but it did not involve much audience participation. Using simple tasks that are explained carefully to the audience allow children to participate, hence why the Kids Quest offers opportunities for children to turn pages in a book, ask a question, or copy a movement. Tasks help move the plot along, serving as the "breakdown" of a story that children can do for their peers in the audience (Crimmens 2006 p 31).



Feya's book is an essential prop to the plotline. Not only does it move the story along, but it aides in comprehension and group participation within the show. Importantly, as noted by Crimmens; “ When cognitive abilities are impaired, the ability to imagine is compromised. We become literal and need concreteness in order to understand. A story is an abstract concept couched in language.” ( Crimmens 2006 p 32). I chose the book as the one major prop for this reason. In order for young children to grasp the story being told, I needed to put the story into a concrete format. The audience should become a part of the literal story, as the patrons coming to the Faire are also a part of the “story”, should they choose to participate. In addition to the book prop, a coloring book of the faerie characters will serve as a visual aid for children who wish to learn the faerie names or need a visual to help them remember each character.



ex. of “Puck” art by Sergio Rossetti

As young children are so literal, I wanted to make the story we were telling aloud more tangible. As many young children are read to from storybooks at home and in the classroom, I wished to utilize our book in a similar format. The “puzzle” is both literal and figurative; there are the physical puzzle pieces that the audience must obtain in order for Feya to see the faeries, but overlaid there is the concept of solving the mystery and piecing together meaning. The book and its puzzle pieces attempt to serve as a groundwork for the metaphors we often find in storytelling and in problem solving. The abstract idea of “finding the title of the story” is made concrete through the tasks the audience completes. The audience learns about each character as they enter and through the option of interaction, should the audience wish to partake.

#### Silent Language - The Faeries Through the Lens of Play in Drama Therapy Approaches

The faerie characters we have created are built for the spontaneous play of children. In the Drama Therapy setting, play is mostly observed between parents and children, but for the purposes of the faeries as an experiment in children’s play, I place them in the adult role. Steve Harvey writes about the concept of “Dynamic Play” in Drama Therapy, which is essentially what the faerie characters improvised scenes are built upon; “In such improvisation the use of role playing and the narrative development of scene and story interweave with interactions in which actors pay attention to and use the qualities of their physical expression in fluid ways. The shared “story” emerges from verbal content or character in one moment and a shared spontaneous dance in another.” (Harvey 2000 p387).

Dynamic Play Intervention (a Drama Therapy approach) is grown out of the influence of physical drama and contact improvisation, as well as clinical applications of attachment theory. Within it, the physical interactions of children and families create dramatic improvisations (Harvey 2000 p 387).

While I will not say the faeries are therapeutic, I will say that they allow for genuine, intimate engagement. Children have the opportunity to engage with characters who can only be seen by them. The children ultimately decide the stories they create with these characters in a given moment at the Faire; beginning with if they choose to engage with them or not. The “physical expression” as described above, is the language of the faeries, and it is made specific by the actors portraying the characters. The specificity of the moment, of allowing the child’s narrative to direct what the character will say or do, is storytelling and theatre in a very pure form.

#### Interactive Theatre as a Teaching Tool

The aim of theorists Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire has been to utilize theatre as a tool to incite action within groups of people (namely the oppressed). Following their train of thought, I seek to create an opportunity for learning, to incite creativity and curiosity among my audience. When a character such as Feyra is nearby, oral language is added carefully to the visual language of the faeries. Feyra creates a classroom in this sense, with herself as facilitator/ teacher.

Barbara Morgan-Fleming states in *Folklore in Schools: Connections Between Folklore and Education*; “ In researching teaching, I have found classrooms to be complex, oral environments in which the teacher must combine knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and management structures. The teacher must then orally improvise a means to meet the complementary and conflicting goals he or she may have....Oral skills have not been highlighted; instead such knowledge has been embedded in categories...” (Morgan-Fleming 2005 p 59).

Folklore is wonderful and visceral when experienced orally, as these stories have been passed down through cultures for generations. The knowledge within folklore then is gained through listening. When we are enacting the Kids Quest, we are asking children to incite the story, and work together to have it told. Feya becomes the teacher, and the audience her students. The story is gently carried by Feya as she acts as translator for the faeries, but the power to control the story is put into the hands of the audience/students as Feya cannot see the faeries until the puzzle pieces are obtained.

Feya utilizes visual management structures to help the audience to focus, much as an early childhood educator would (in fact, many of the visual tasks/cues such as “wiggle your pinky if...” I have used in my own classroom). The curriculum is the curriculum of early childhood; learning/practicing how to work as a group and how to listen to/follow directions. There is no judgement in the kids Quest, and there is no grade. I feel the process and the experience is the most important part of the show itself.

### Personal Reflection

Before I became a teacher, I worked as an actor and performance artist. I remember making the transition into teaching full-time, and how a part of me felt like it was dying. I cared so deeply about the stories out in the world, especially the old ones (namely Shakespeare) that I wanted to tell because I loved them so deeply. It was hard becoming a teacher at first, because I felt like I was walking away from that world.

As I started to work with young children, and started my career at Bank Street College, I began to realize more and more that teaching and acting were both effectively about sharing and creating. Becoming a teacher has helped to better inform my creative side; I can trust myself more now than I ever could previously. When considering what to do for my Master's Project, I kept coming back to the Faire and the creative experiences I have had there. I decided to return to my roots and apply my first passion (acting) to my second passion (teaching).

As I have been working in a directorial capacity, but will also be playing one of the faeries this season, I have had the distinct pleasure of both creating and teaching with what I consider a not only talented, but incredibly honest cast of people.

When we first began, it was much like the first day of school. I went around the group, asking everyone to describe a bit about their background and what faerie folklore we had been considering together. There was admittedly a lot of hesitation because it started as a rather amorphous production - being asked to consider who you are in relation to what you're going to portray is a concept discussed often in acting school, but not often in the

process of rehearsal for a professional show. This is due to the fact that money needs to be made and there is not often the luxury of time in such a rehearsal process.

I wanted to take my actors back to basics, although I was worried about the basics myself. After having my actors complete the survey, I felt that they were uncomfortable putting their thoughts to paper, or perhaps that the questions were too scripted. I decided in an effort to learn more about them in an open and honest way that I would set the precedent for honesty myself. This is essential to me in my teaching practice, I feel that dishonesty is rampant in our society and the best way to combat it is with our own equal and complete honesty as teachers. Sometimes this is difficult with young children because we want to protect their innocence. I'm still learning that balance.

In rehearsal, I asked each actor to choose a poem or song that they related to, personally. The poems were then read aloud while the actor told the story of the poem through movement as their character would. Afterwards we discussed why these poems and songs were important to us. I began the exercise by performing a piece to a segment of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner". I described how the passage about the albatross spoke to me, as I had just ended my engagement, and I felt that many people were angry at me for it. The albatross as allegory, as folklore, speaks to me on this deep level, I walk with it about my neck.

After I made the choice to be honest, and modeled my piece, I found that my actors began to open up about themselves. Everyone had chosen their poetry for a strong reason, the stories those poems and lyrics contained were part of their personal lore, their own

story. They were essentially my students, but I had not made a safe enough space for them to make a strong choice until this moment. As I reflect back on the rehearsal process, it is this moment that stands out the most to me. They began to understand and believe in the world we were trying to create as soon as I told them that their honesty was okay.

I feel this is something we lose as we get older - our innate honesty. That honesty is part of our ability to tell stories, but as we become more concerned with the social world and how we will be perceived, we begin to shrink away from what we are. Part of creating a classroom culture of acceptance and honesty is allowing space for personal storytelling while actively listening.

I am not sure how much of an impact my show will have on the children that come through the Faire this season, but I do know that I and my cast are working hard to create a space for these children, as we have carved a space for ourselves and our stories.

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## **Appendix I**

### **The Interview Survey**

SAMPLE:

Corbett

Summer II

May 25, 2015

#### **Cultural and Ethnic Background Survey**

Thank you for your participation in my Integrative Master's Project! Please answer the following questions as completely as possible. Only write what you are comfortable sharing. We will discuss these as a group at Company Meeting on May 30<sup>th</sup>.

Name:

1. What is/ what do you know about your ethnic background?:
2. What is your cultural background?:
3. With which background(s) do you more identify?
4. Please give 5 adjectives to describe yourself:
5. Name a story that you remember enjoying from your childhood. What was the medium? (i.e. a movie, picture book, oral telling of a story, etc.)

## **Appendix II - Consent Letter and Release Form**

Dear Actors,

Welcome to the cast! As you know, I am currently a student at Bank Street College, completing my Master's degree in early childhood special and general education. As part of my graduate work, I am writing an Independent Study, a requirement for my degree and a culmination of my studies.

For my project, I have chosen to write a children's theatrical production that is appropriate and inclusive of a broad spectrum of development in young children. You will be performing this show, and your character will be built around our ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I will be asking you to complete a short survey (5 questions) pertaining to your backgrounds and we will be discussing techniques for working with young children throughout our rehearsal process.

Together, these will serve as the primary data for my study. Every individual will be given a pseudonym and any identifying features will be disguised. In order to use the written documentation, I need your permission. The study that results from this project will be shared as a PDF with the Bank Street community in a password-protected searchable database and may also be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street Library where it would be catalogued as part of the Library collection and entered into an international database for wider circulation. The material may also be included in professional presentations and publications. If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Catherine Corbett

### Consent Form Sample

I have carefully read the information provided above and give my permission to **Catherine Corbett** to use direct quotes about our rehearsal and creative process as pertains to “The Kids Quest” theatrical production. I understand that my name and any other people I describe will be protected by pseudonyms in the actual thesis as well as well as in any professional talks and publications based on this research. I give permission to Catherine Corbett to use the above noted documentation of my rehearsal and creative process in the thesis document and in professional presentations and publications.

I have read this release form and agree to its terms knowingly and voluntarily.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

